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ABSTRACT

A course on the needs of students with disabilities implemented an activity for preservice vocational teachers to promote problem solving and active application of knowledge. Participants carried out the following activities: (1) observing and interviewing a student with a disability and his or her teachers; (2) writing a case study about the student; (3) participating in group problem-solving sessions with other preservice educators; and (4) designing an instructional modification for their student. Over a 2-year period, 37 vocational education majors at a large southeastern university participated. Participants were teamed according to their students' areas of disability or learning difficulty. Three main themes emerged from the participants' written case reports: perception of normality, self-image of the student, and lack of friendships. Many participants found that their assigned students looked like their peers without disabilities, wanted to keep their disability a secret, and had low self-confidence, esteem, or image. Participants were aware that many students had very appropriate peer relationships but not all had positive social interactions. The preservice educators indicated the case study was beneficial in encouraging them to reflect on their preconceptions; they benefitted from observing other school personnel making accommodations for special needs students; and they learned how multidimensional the issue of assisting a student with a disability could be. (Contains 19 references.) (YLB)

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Writing Case Studies: A Holistic Approach for Teaching Preservice Educators About Students With Disabilities

Paper Presented at the 1996 Meeting of
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Abstract

The purpose of this presentation is to describe an approach to teaching preservice vocational educators about students with disabilities. The approach involved (a) observing and interviewing a student with a disability and his or her teachers, (b) writing a case study about the student, (c) participating in group problem-solving sessions with other preservice educators, and (d) designing an instructional modification for their assigned student based on information gathered. This paper also discusses what the presenters learned about selected preservice educator's preconceptions and beliefs concerning students with disabilities. Recommendations are provided with respect to how writing case studies may assist preservice educators in gaining experience with application of knowledge from college classrooms to assisting students with disabilities in secondary vocational settings.

Presentation Objectives

- To discuss how case writing activities can benefit preservice vocational educators.
- To examine preservice vocational educators' perceptions and beliefs about students with disabilities.
- To explore how case writing activities can be used for group and individual problem-solving activities.
- To demonstrate how writing case studies assisted in the development of individual instructional modifications for students with disabilities.

Writing Case Studies: A Holistic Approach for Teaching Preservice Educators About Students With Disabilities

More than three-fourths of students with disabilities who receive vocational education do so in mainstreamed vocational classrooms rather than in special education programs (Wagner, 1991). With the current inclusion movement, these numbers will increase. Therefore, vocational personnel need effective instruction in the educational needs of these students. Several authors have claimed that insufficient emphasis is given to teaching preservice teachers strategies that enhance the successful inclusion of students with disabilities (Okolo & Sitlington, 1988; Sarkees & West, 1990; Veir, 1990). For example, preparation for teaching students with special learning needs typically consists of a single university course on the topic. However, this is not a requirement in all states. Jones and Black (1996) found that only 21 states required vocational educators to take such a course. In other states such a course may be taken by vocational educators as an elective, or may be infused throughout teacher preparation coursework. As a result, many vocational educators enter the classroom unprepared for the diversity of student learning needs they will face.

Benefits of Using a Case Study Approach

The authors strongly believe that learning needs to be maximized when preservice teachers enroll in what may be the only course they take on the needs of students with disabilities, therefore, we implemented an activity to promote problem-solving and active application of knowledge gained from this class. This activity involved preservice vocational teachers (a) observing and interviewing a student with a disability and his or her teachers, (b) writing a case study about the student, (c) participating in group problem-solving sessions with other preservice educators, and (d) designing an instructional modification for their assigned

student based on information gathered. This activity, which will be referred to as "the case writing activity," encouraged personal involvement, allowed learners to examine large-scale problems close up, and enabled learners to get to know a student and the teacher who is working with that student. Preservice teachers could then put a name and a face to the types of disabilities they were learning about in their university classroom. Issues no longer encompassed the whole population of students with learning difficulties, but a real person with strengths, feelings, and educational needs. The case writing activity also allowed prospective vocational educators to apply theoretical constructs from education methods classes to situations which occurred in real classrooms.

Having novice teachers articulate ideas and beliefs about teaching through writing case studies is valuable in preparing them to be reflective educators (Erdman, 1987; Richert, 1992). The activity is valuable because they may not be proficient at identifying problems and automatically transferring their knowledge to solve those problems in practical settings (Ashbaugh & Kasten, 1993). Through case writing, preservice teachers learn to identify problems and decision points, as well as examine possible consequences and outcomes (Shulman & Mesa-Bains, 1993). Writing a case study gives preservice educators opportunities to *think like teachers*, formulate beliefs and philosophies about teaching, and bridge the chasm between principle and practice (Kleinfeld, 1992; Shulman, 1992).

Purpose

The purpose of the case writing activity was to engage preservice vocational educators in observation and writing to provide a more holistic approach to learning about instruction for students with disabilities. By writing a case study, the preservice educator were given an opportunity to contextualize theories and principles learned in college coursework and apply

their learning to real secondary classroom situations. The case writing assignment also allowed preservice teachers to reflect on their experience and describe their preconceptions and perceptions. The purpose of this presentation is to describe (a) what the preservice educators learned about problem-solving and instructional modifications, and (b) what we learned about preservice vocational educator's perceptions and beliefs about students with disabilities from the case writing activity.

Procedures: The Case Writing Activity

Over a two-year period of time, 37 vocational education majors at a large southeastern university participated in the case writing activity. Preservice educators, referred to as participants, were enrolled in a course entitled *Students with Special Needs in Programs of Occupational Studies* which meets the one course requirement for teacher certification in the state of Georgia. None of the participants had prior teaching experience, and with the exception of 1 student, none had experience working with students with disabilities before enrolling in the course.

As a class project, participants were assigned to observe a specific student with a disability at a local secondary school and to interview the student and the student's vocational and special education teachers. The assignment required participants to spend time in vocational class and lab settings. Strict adherence to confidentiality of student information was observed throughout the project.

Participants formed problem-solving teams. These teams shared information about student observations. Participants were encouraged to assist each other in determining instructional strategies and possible modifications of teaching methods appropriate for each team members' assigned student. Participants then synthesized information gathered from the

observations, interviews, and problem-solving discussions to write a case report about their experience. Based on the students' needs identified in the case report, preservice participants then developed a specific instructional modification appropriate for that student. At the end of the course, these projects were given to teachers of these students.

Using Case Studies for Team and Individual Problem-Solving

Participants teamed together according to their students' areas of disability or learning difficulty. As they shared their experiences, participants began to see similarities in ways students could receive intervention. Working together as team members allowed participants to simulate collaborative teaching and to realize how vital a network of support is to students as well as teachers. Problem-solving team members were able to generate more ideas for intervention strategies than an individual would have. Team members also assisted each other with fleshing out intervention techniques. Working in problem solving groups provided a broader perspective which reflected activities of real teaching situations.

Instructional Modifications

Participants used their written cases and problem-solving sessions to design an instructional modification specifically for their assigned student. Several of the participants commented that they would have made general rather than specific modifications had they not prepared the written case report. For example, one teacher informed the participant that the student needed assistance with reading. Upon closer observation, the participant determined (with help from the problem-solving team) that the student had difficulty staying on task when reading. The participant then developed a self-monitoring and reward system for on-task behavior and a strategy to help the student recognize off-task behavior.

Two students, one in agriculture and one in construction, were having difficulty reading rulers and measuring tapes. The participants observing those students prepared intervention strategies on learning to read a ruler. One participant prepared a workbook with instructions and problems. The other build a color-coded unit of blocks which represented fractions of 1/32, 1/16, 1/8, 1/4, ½, and 1 inch. When the two participants realized they were working toward the same goal, they recommended that the two vocational teachers use both strategies with both students for reinforcement.

One strategy involved self-monitoring techniques at the student's employment site, a horticulture nursery. The participant developed a written and pictorial list of the tasks the student performed at work. Since twelve duties were involved, it was determined a single card would represent a single task. Cards were laminated and placed in pockets on a chart. The chart was placed in the office by the time clock. The intended purpose was to teach the student to refer to the chart for cards selected by her employer, thus reducing the amount of time the employer spent giving directions. The student withdrew one card from the "to do" pocket, completed the task, then placed the card in the "done" pocket of the chart. When the student had progressed with the teachers original tasks, her employer could add new tasks.

The case study assignment allowed the participant to become familiar with the backgrounds of their students and better understand why students and teachers do what they do in a classroom. Several participants stated that the case writing activity added meaning to the class. It provided them with an opportunity to practice what they had discussed in large and small group discussions and provided hands-on experience in the kinds of modifications students with disabilities need. The participants stated that without a particular student in mind, the value of instructional modifications seemed less significant. By directly applying instructional

modifications to a real student, the preservice teachers gained confidence in their abilities to do the same in their own classrooms in the not so distant future. In addition, the written case reports provided insight into the participants preconceptions and perceptions about students with disabilities.

Perceptions and Beliefs About Students with Disabilities

Three main themes emerged from the participants' written case reports including: (a) perception of normality, (b) self-image of the student, and (c) lack of friendships. Because these themes were common to nearly all of the written case reports, we believe these topics are important in understanding preservice vocational educators' views of students with disabilities.

Perception of normality. Many participants wrote that their assigned student looked like their peers without disabilities. There was strong evidence that *normal* appearance came as a surprise.

> "*Her classmates probably do not even know she is considered ADHD.*"
>
> *"He did not stand out from the rest of the students. Then I came to find out that there were two other students with LD and that surprised me. I thought these students would be like outcasts with no one to talk to or pal around with, but this was not the case. . . . He seemed very normal."*
>
> "*He appears and acts like an average student. He is well-groomed, friendly, easy-going. Just the type of person everyone likes.*"
>
> *"Before I met Suzanne I tried to picture her in my mind. She looked nothing like the picture I had [drawn] of her. I truly thought that I could look at Suzanne and tell who she was. I was wrong. I am very glad that I had the opportunity to observe Suzanne. She destroyed a lot of preconceived myths that I had about students with disabilities."*
>
> *"He looked like a normal clean-cut kid."*

The awareness of students with *invisible* disabilities was an important learning experience for these participants. Learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, and intellectual disabilities such as mental retardation had been defined and discussed in class. However, many of the

preservice teachers apparently needed the actual experience of observing and interacting with a student with disabilities to better understand the impact these disabilities have on learning, classroom performance, and social interaction.

The following quotes are representative statements regarding appropriate or *normal* peer socialization:

> *"I was shocked when the teacher called roll. My student had been talking, and laughing with others in their group. She was even coming up with good ideas about their fund-rasing project."*

> *"He was not what I expected a behavior disordered student to be. He has good physical appearance and seems to be very popular with the other students in his small engine repair class. I have reason to believe that he has popularity throughout the school from what I have seen and what his teachers say. This is obvious because he rarely makes it to classes on time because he is usually out in the halls socializing. . . He has good leadership skills."*

One interesting finding is that participants who mentioned that their student exhibited appropriate peer socialization were also most likely to mention that the student looked *normal*. They realized, social competence influenced others' perceptions of whether a student was viewed as looking like they had a disability.

Self-image of the student. While the first theme, appearance, clearly reflected the participants' perceptions of the student, this theme revealed more about the self-image of the student. Many participants wrote that their student wanted to keep their disability a secret. The following statement is representative of several of the written reports: *"The vocational teacher has never been given any information on Tom and does not know what his disability is. Tom doesn't want to be identified as special needs."* This illustrates quite a dilemma. Tom was afraid of peer rejection if he was identified as a student with special needs. On the other hand, because the teacher did not know Tom's learning needs, it would be difficult to make appropriate

instructional modifications. It is this kind of dilemma that we wanted the participants to reflect upon, wrestle with, and try to generate solutions for.

Low self-confidence, self-esteem or self-image was also a commonly mentioned in the case reports. *"His low self-esteem stemming mainly from his learning disability, would be pretty tough to deal with, but Doug seems to handle everything well. He did make several comments about being slow and stupid."* The participants' observations and comments concerning low self-esteem of many students with disabilities are supported by literature concerning the adverse effects of low educational performance on self-esteem (Black, 1974; Canino, 1981; Coley & Hoffman, 1990; Durrant, 1993).

Lack of friendships. Participants were quite cognizant of whether their assigned students had developed friends with their classmates without disabilities. While many of the students have very appropriate peer relationships, not all of the assigned students had positive social interactions with peers. Several of the written accounts included descriptions such as the following:

> *"Mr. Wester said he never interacts with the students in class and never interacts with him."*
>
> *"The lack of interaction between her and her classmates is blatantly evident."*
>
> *"Beth sits at a table with another special education student. The other students are talking before class, but not to her. She takes a bottle of white-out from her backpack and paints her fingernails with it. One student at another table points at Beth and they roll their eyes."*
>
> *"The other students kept their backs toward Candace for the entire period. Maybe they were afraid she was going to talk to them. . . She often pushed her chair away from the table, probably not wanting to be with the group."*
>
> *"Deidre seems to be starving for interaction with the other students. I get the feeling that she wants to fit in with them but is afraid to try. The other students (at least in her home economics class) are very nice to her. They just don't talk to her because she does not*

talk to them. . . . Whatever she was doing, however, she was constantly watching everyone else."

Developing and maintaining friendships occupies a prominent role in the lives of adolescents with or without disabilities. The presence or absence of friends in school was apparently quite noticeable to the participants as well. While these students with disabilities were included in regular vocational education classes, not all of them were socially integrated. Yet, peer interventions have been quite successful in improving the social interactions of elementary students with disabilities (Brown & Odom, 1994; Haring & Breen, 1992; Odom, Chandler, Ostrosky, McConnell, & Reaney, 1992). Similar peer intervention strategies such as peer tutoring or peer networking may also be beneficial for high school students to enable them to, in time, initiate and maintain friendships on their own. Vocational educators are in an excellent position to offer coaching and social support to those students in need of assistance in developing meaningful peer relationships.

Implications for Vocational Teacher Education

The preservice educators indicated that writing a case report about their student was beneficial in several ways. First, it encouraged them to reflect on their preconceptions about students with disabilities. Second, the preservice educators benefitted from observing other school personnel such as paraprofessionals and teachers making accommodations for students with special needs. Third, the preservice educators commented on how multi-dimensional the issue of assisting a student with a disability could be.

To become thoughtful and creative problem solvers, vocational personnel need practice in analyzing problems, asking questions, and considering what other teachers might do. When a preservice educator writes a case report, he or she rethinks the events of a critical incident. Through that action, they engage in the process of creating meaning. Writing provides distance

from the event and allows for new perspectives, thus enabling the event to be viewed in new ways.

Case writing activities, like the one described in this presentation, can familiarize prospective teachers with the real world of teaching. Sparks-Langer and Colton (1991) state there are three major benefits derived from teachers' writing their stories. First, written reports give us insight into what motivates the writer. We found the preservice educators in this project were initially motivated to speak about their own perceptions toward students with disabilities. They found it beneficial to acknowledge their own beliefs and biases toward adolescents with disabilities in general. Only then could they concentrate on what the individual student needed to succeed in vocational programs. Second, narratives provide detailed examples of teaching dilemmas and events. We found the preservice educators benefitted from observing and participating with a team of professionals describing and solving dilemmas. Once they determined educational barriers facing the student, they could work toward a practical solution. The third and perhaps most valuable benefit is insight gained by the preservice educators themselves as a result of self-inquiry. Participants in this study discovered many of their preconceptions about students with disabilities were erroneous. By becoming involved with the unique personality and learning needs of a student, the preservice educators were better able to create an instructional technique or modification for that student. By looking into students' background variables, the preservice educators began to look for reasons the students might be having difficulties. Their skill and confidence in recognizing their own abilities to identify problems and find solutions increased. They were beginning to think like teachers.

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